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A Pilot Project Using a Community Approach to Support Child Protection Services in China

Abstract

This article documents how a community approach was used as part of developing a child protection service in China. In order to demonstrate the potential of the community approach, it is first argued that the fragmented institutional arrangements and weakening family care in China have resulted in an incomplete system that leaves vulnerable children with insufficient support. However, as the current literature indicates, the community approach can be considered to provide an effective solution by mobilising community resources in the Chinese context. A pilot project which was set within a child protection service and delivered by a non-governmental organisation is presented as a case study. Five key elements that define the Chinese practice of the community approach can be summarised: (1) a belief in the important role of the community in the child protection system; (2) targeting those vulnerable children experiencing child maltreatment issues but with little family care; (3) the importance of involving the community in reporting, referral and intervention systems; (4) highlighting the protective role that the community can play; (5) collaborating with government to ensure the support of statutory resources. Lastly, this article discusses both the potential and challenges of using the community approach in this context.

Key Words

Child Protection; Child Maltreatment; Community Development; Social Work; China

1. Introduction

As there is currently no formal reporting system for child maltreatment in China, its official prevalence remains unknown. However, current research literature strongly indicates that child maltreatment in China is a serious issue. In relation to physical neglect, according to Pan et al.'s (2014) nation-wide survey, the prevalence rates for middle- and high-school students in rural areas were 12.7% and 17.8% respectively, while the prevalence rates of emotional neglect were recorded as 15.3% and 14.1%. Ji et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis brought together estimates of sexual abuse of children in China, which were 13.8% for males and 15.3% for females. Using a similar methodology, Ji & Finkelhor (2015) indicated that between 1990 and 2013 the life-time prevalence of any physical abuse was 36.6%.

The scale of the child maltreatment issue in China is internationally comparable. Pan et al.'s (2014) estimates of physical and emotional neglect for rural students were very close to global levels, which were reported to be 16.3% for physical neglect and 18.4% for emotional neglect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013a). Ji et al.'s (2013) estimates of child sexual abuse for males and females also fell within the international range as identified by Finkelhor (1994) (3% to 29% for men and 7% to 36% for women). Meanwhile, the figures for physical abuse provided by Ji and Finkelhor (2015) were even higher than the reported global prevalence of 22.6% (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013b).

The above statistics indicate a pressing need to tackle the serious issue of child maltreatment in China. The Chinese governments' inclusion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the nation's child protection services is an emerging trend that must be noted. In 2018, the central government spent 55.76 million yuan (6.16 million GBP) on contracting out 148 projects related to child services. That amount of spending on child services was 1.41 times greater than the amount spent in 2013, and it made up 30.81% of the total funding for contracted-out social services at the central level (UNICEF and China Philanthropy Research Institute, 2019). From within that context, the purpose of this article is to introduce an NGO-implemented community approach based on a local child protection service and evaluate its potential and challenges. It will begin with an analysis of the insufficiencies of both the institutional system and of family care in protecting vulnerable children. Then, it will review the merits of the

community approach and explore its possible application in the Chinese context. In the following sections, the article will report on a pilot project applying the community approach into a child protection service. Lastly, it will conclude with a discussion about the potentials and challenges of promoting this approach in future.

2. Contextualising the Chinese Child Protection System

2.1 Fragmented Institutional Arrangements

The key elements of a comprehensive institutional system for child protection – including specific statutory agencies, a reporting system and processing procedures, and alternative institutional care – have long been found incomplete in China (Katz et al., 2011). First, formal responsibility for child welfare rests with a number of different authorities, whose remit, furthermore, is very limited. As the most relevant administrative unit concerned with the welfare of vulnerable children, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) traditionally only targets orphans, child beggars and poor children living on benefits. In addition, the Youth League and the Women’s Federation (WF), which are ‘mass organisations’ led by the Communist Party of China, are expected to represent the interests of young people, children and women. However, both organisations seldom provide direct services and they function more as administrative co-ordinators.

The second problem concerns the lack of both official reporting and processing mechanisms for child protection. Although responsibility for dealing with crimes against children rests largely with the Public Security Departments, they rarely intervene unless ‘the act of maltreating a child [is] serious, malicious in intent, frequent and continuous for a long period of time’ (Qiao & Chan, 2005: 23). Likewise, other stakeholders have little knowledge of how to deal with child maltreatment cases. For example, Peng et al. (2015) surveyed physicians and nurses in the emergency departments in 15 large children’s hospitals. 86.2% of the respondents were unaware of any standardised protocol for identifying, diagnosing or reporting physical abuse. Similarly, 77.1% of healthcare professionals from a survey in four provinces indicated that ‘lacking knowledge’ was a primary obstacle to the reporting of child maltreatment cases, and 74% indicated that ‘not [being] clear about reporting procedures and regulation’ was also a primary obstacle (Li et al., 2017).

1 The third missing element in the Chinese child protection system relates to alternative
2 care. Only those children whose parents and other possible legal guardians are either
3 deceased or cannot be located can be admitted to local welfare homes (Shang et al.,
4 2010). In other words, the transfer of guardianship to the state does not normally apply
5 to those children with families, even if they are found to be living in unsatisfactory
6 environments.

7
8 It should be noted that incremental advances are being made in the institutional system
9 of child protection in China. In 2013, four local authorities were instructed to pilot new
10 protective systems for vulnerable children. In addition to the original targets, such as
11 orphans, child beggars, and poor children, a new target group called ‘children from
12 families with difficulties’ (*kunjing jiating*) was officially proposed. This target group
13 referred to children whose parents were failing to carry out their actual child
14 guardianship responsibilities, whether because of severe disabilities, illness, death,
15 being in jail, or being in compulsory rehabilitation (MCA, 2013). This experiment was
16 soon expanded to another 46 local authorities in the following year (MCA, 2014). In
17 addition to the new target group, a policy review based on those pilots pointed out that
18 the creation of the new Chinese child protection system was characterised by placing
19 the primary responsibility on the Civil Affairs departments, starting to establish the
20 reporting procedures, and relying primarily on volunteer groups to provide services
21 (Man et al., 2017). Following the State Council’s (2016) demands that the experiences
22 of these pilots be institutionalised across China in 2016, it is not surprising to find that
23 in 2019 the MCA established an independent Department of Child Welfare that was
24 responsible for protecting vulnerable children.

25 26 2.2 Over-Estimated Confucian Familism

27 The other significant drawback of the current child protection system in China is related
28 to the over-emphasis on family support. Although Confucian teaching places a high
29 value on compliance with hierarchal orders and informal obligations within the family
30 unit (Jones, 1993), questions are beginning to be raised about the potential problems of
31 family support. First, rather than being perceived as a violation of individual rights,
32 child maltreatment may be justified by traditional culture. As Qiao and Chan (2005)
33 elaborate, the notions of ‘jia zhang’ (ruler of the household) and ‘guan’ (to care for as

well as to govern) have been prevalent in Chinese society and they can be used to justify abuse as ‘discipline’.

For example, nearly two-thirds of a sample of Chinese university students agreed that ‘parents should be allowed to discipline their children by using some form of physical punishment’ (Hester et al., 2009: 410). According to Qiao and Xie (2017)’s qualitative study, Chinese parents endorsed corporal punishment if it was motivated by good intentions for the child’s longer-term benefit.

A second important factor undermining the functions of family care is related to increased migration and urbanisation. When parents migrate from their hometowns to cities for work, they leave behind a large group of children. According to Duan et al. (2017), the number of left-behind children was estimated to be 68.77 million in 2015, which was about a quarter of the entire child population in China. 40.51 million of these left-behind children were living in rural areas and 74% were younger than twelve years of age. Moreover, 48% of the rural left-behind children were not living with either of the parents and approximately 3% (around 1.17 million children) were even living alone.

Due to their lack of proper care, left-behind children are more likely to be exposed to risks. It has been estimated that their risk of being neglected may be 1.398 times greater than the risk for ordinary children (Chen et al., 2019). Another quantitative study showed that left-behind children suffered more experiences of victimization (including the subtype of child maltreatment) and higher levels of depression than those living with their biological parents did (Chen and Chan, 2016). Even when left-behind children migrated with their families and lived in cities, they still had higher odds of being psychologically abused by their parents (1.490 times as likely) and physically abused by their parents (1.425 times as likely) compared with the likelihood for local children (Gao et al., 2017).

Given the fragmented institutional system and the weakening family system, it is helpful to consider whether there are other possible approaches that could be used to improve the current child protection system. The next section will review insights

1 offered by the community approach to child protection and assess its potential in the
2 Chinese context.

4 **3. Introducing the Community Approach**

5 3.1 Features

6 Three distinct features of the community approach can be recognised in the current
7 literature. First, instead of adopting individualistic perspectives for intervention, the
8 community approach attaches more importance to the broader environment (Jack, 2004;
9 Jones et al., 2014). Meanwhile, in relation to responding to the needs of children, this
10 approach moves from a reliance upon a small number of professionals authorised to
11 exercise legislative power, to engaging with a wider range of community members
12 (Wright, 2004).

13
14 A second feature of the community approach rests on the principles of community
15 development. The ultimate goal is to maximise ‘community ownership’, which refers
16 to ‘community members’ sense that...they have the power and the responsibility to
17 support vulnerable children’ (Wessells, 2015: 10). Local stakeholders are encouraged
18 to define the problems within the community and subsequently develop trust within
19 local networks to search for appropriate local solutions. Common mechanisms for
20 building the community network include community surveys, youth forums (Wright,
21 2004), networking (Davies, 2004), cooperative businesses (Jones et al., 2014), and
22 volunteer-provided services (Tunstill & Malin, 2011).

23
24 A third feature of this approach is that the protective role of the community becomes
25 heightened. A number of studies have highlighted how the community approach can
26 move beyond purely a preventative approach to a protective role. For example, the work
27 of Davies (2004) showed how a network of protective adults within the community
28 could be used to monitor abusers and to inform social workers, if necessary. Pilot
29 projects in two English local authorities trained volunteers to deliver family support
30 services for families that had children on the Child Protection Register (Tunstill &
31 Malin, 2011). From a large sample in an American county, Maguire-Jack and Showalter
32 (2016) identified a negative relationship between neighbourhood social cohesion and
33 the neglect of children’s basic needs.

Further international studies have demonstrated the potential of the community approach in protecting children. Work within Kenyan refugee camps showed how social workers helped unaccompanied Somali children to be fostered by their nearest relatives or clan members (Jones et al., 2014). Meanwhile, a study in Southern Lebanon found that community engagement in a child protection project increased the feelings of ‘hope’ for the Palestinian children living in refugee camps (O’Leary et al., 2015). In another study in rural Sierra Leone, a community-driven approach was developed that successfully achieved the goal of reducing teenage pregnancies (Wessells, 2015: 10).

3.2 Potential

Efforts to use the community as an agent in the intervention into child protection could potentially be a successful pathway for China. The first reason is because the community already has a recognised role in welfare provision, especially in East Asian welfare regimes. Wood and Gough (2006) have proposed to include the community as a fourth domain in the welfare mix, along with the state, market and family. The notion of ‘community’ in this context can be seen to include informal groups as well as domestic and international NGOs. They have also revealed that much of the East Asian region, including China, could be found as heavily relying on the family and community for welfare support, which can generate relatively satisfactory welfare outcomes.

A second reason for considering adopting the community approach for child protection is because its potential contribution has increasingly been acknowledged in the Chinese context. For example, it was found that neighbours and friends in the community would contribute their in-kind assistance to the care of orphans in rural China (Shang et al., 2010). An investigation in the early 2000s revealed a long-standing practice of welfare homes placing their orphans in certain rural communities, called ‘foster mother villages’. In that study, foster mothers were motivated by ‘maternal love’ to take on childcare responsibilities, in return for very modest financial allowances. Despite a lack of formal support, those foster mothers supported one another by sharing their own experiences of child care (Shang & Wu, 2003a).

Recently, Gao et al. (2017) noted the importance of community in child protection policies, because they found that neighbourhood disorganisation was significantly

1 related to the psychological aggression experienced by migrant children. In contrast,
2 Zhao et al. (2017a) evaluated 12 children's clubs that were mainly managed by
3 volunteers in poor villages in China. They found that those establishments were not
4 only beneficial for the psychological well-being of left-behind children, but they also
5 strengthened local informal networks by engaging community members. Similarly,
6 Jiang et al. (2019) discovered that community-based protections (e.g., home visits by
7 specialised staff), along with school-based protections, were negatively associated with
8 the victimisation of left-behind children in rural China.

9
10 Thirdly, in addition to informal community groups, there is further scope within China
11 for NGOs to be involved in supporting child protection services. In an early report in
12 2003, Shang & Wu (2003b) demonstrated how international NGOs had worked with
13 local welfare homes to launch community-based foster care projects and prepare
14 orphans for adoption. Moreover, an increasing involvement of NGOs in delivering child
15 protection services has recently been observed, and the emerging profession of social
16 work is now expected to carry out more of the protective responsibilities (Zhao et al.,
17 2017b). For example, Zhao et al. (2017c) illustrated how hospital social workers in
18 Shanghai intervened in child maltreatment cases by providing psychological and social
19 support.

20
21 It must be noted that a community-based project that subsidises local child welfare
22 workers (so-called 'barefoot social workers') for delivering protective services to left-
23 behind children has been rapidly promoted in rural China. With collaboration among
24 governments, charity foundations, and research institutes, this project is designed to
25 train local females for conducting playgroups or facilitating policy resources at the
26 village level. The project was piloted in 120 villages in five provinces in 2010, and by
27 2018 it covered approximately 61 thousand villages in 31 provinces (China
28 Philanthropy Research Institute and UNICEF, 2019). It has been demonstrated
29 empirically that this barefoot social work project has significantly improved the well-
30 being (e.g., the health, safety, and guardianship) of left-behind children in villages
31 (Guan and Deng, forthcoming).

3.3 Concerns

Despite the above potential for introducing the community approach to child protection into China, there are still some concerns that need to be further addressed in practice. First, despite the premise that it should be adopted because of the strengths of community resources, the community approach may be promoted simply to justify the retreat of the state from welfare provision. Characteristically, because of its very low costs, the Chinese ‘foster mother villages’ was actually a ‘forced option’ in order to relieve the financial pressures on local welfare homes (Shang & Wu, 2003a: 556). Similarly, it was the pressure of spending cuts that compelled Italian social workers to consider involving community members in child protection services (Fazzi, 2019). As a result, the community approach may be alternatively perceived as an efficiency-saving instrument, in which the responsibility for activating informal support mainly lies with front-line professionals but is not given sufficient statutory resources.

A second cause for caution in relation to this approach is that, apart from professional skills, there are other social factors contributing to the success of community development. For example, based on Italian social workers’ views of attempts to involve the community in child protection, Fazzi (2019) suggested that excessive bureaucratic and managerial procedures in organisations can hinder social workers from building community networks. This is because the community approach requires greater professional autonomy, flexible working hours and less pressure from the workload. These preferred organisational conditions, however, may not always align with the characteristics of emerging social work services in China. The author’s own study showed that within the contractual relationship with regional governments, NGOs and social workers were given relatively little autonomy in service delivery and they were preoccupied by heavy workloads rather than focusing on problem-solving.

Thirdly, as long as there is an under-developed institutional system of child protection, the question of whether the protective role of the community can properly function remains unclear. Both of the case studies reported by Davies (2004) and Tunstill & Malin (2011) were used to examine whether the role of the community could be extended from the narrow perception of prevention to a wider function of protection. However, it must be noted that their central focus was placed on how to add voluntary

work to a developed child protection system where statutory services dominated. By contrast, the above-mentioned international experiences were conducted in extreme contexts where a formal child protection system was almost missing in refugee camps (O’Leary et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014) or rural villages (Wessells, 2015). Accordingly, the existing studies are inadequate examples for showing Chinese social workers how the protective role of the community can play a role within an under-developed (but not completely failing) system of child protection.

4. Method

In order to examine the possibilities and challenges of introducing the community approach into China, this paper reports upon a service project undertaken in an area referred to here as Town L. Town L is the neighbour on the west of Guangzhou City, which is one of China’s mega-cities. Therefore, Town L is a relatively developed area in economic terms. It covered an area of 148.3 square kilometres, and is composed of 20 urban communities and 16 rural villages. Moreover, Town L has a mixed population of local families living alongside a considerable migrant population. The total population at the time of the project was approximately 300,000, of which over half were migrant workers. The number of children with a local household registration was 33,658, compared with a registration of 53,279 migrant children.

The pilot, which is described as Project J, was an innovation proposed by Town WF together with an NGO. This project was one of the very first contracted-out services of social work intervention in child maltreatment issues in China. More importantly, it adopted the community approach as its major strategy for intervention. The first stage of the project ran for a year (2014-2015), with three social workers; the second stage of the project ran from 2016-2017 with two social workers in post. The total funding for these two contracts was 598,391 yuan (66,398 GBP).

Project J was designed to target children from families with difficulties, referring to the circumstances in which parent(s) fail to carry out actual guardianship. Meanwhile, such children may undergo issues of neglect, or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. The annual caseload of Project J was set at 20, in addition to the community work of establishing a network for reporting, referrals, and local resource collection. In other

1 words, Project J echoed the policy initiative by providing services to the new target
2 group of children from families with difficulties (State Council, 2016; MCA, 2014;
3 MCA, 2013). Therefore, the research findings of this pilot project will provide policy-
4 makers with valuable experience regarding how the needs of these children can be met
5 at a grass-roots level.

6
7 This study was conducted from January to June, 2018, after the second stage of Project
8 J ended. It was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology and
9 Social Work at the X University. Two sources of data were used for triangulation –
10 documentation and interviews. With the approval of the NGO which implemented
11 Project J, the authors were given access to all the documents related to Project J,
12 including 51 case files, service evaluation reports and other records of the ‘Alliance’ –
13 the community support network.

14
15 In addition to studying the documents, the authors also interviewed the five social
16 workers that had worked in the project. Three of them had social work degrees, whereas
17 the other two had passed the national qualification exams for social work even though
18 they did not have an educational background in the profession. The social workers’
19 average professional experience was four years. Since local WF Directors were the
20 primary partners of Project J, the study’s authors interviewed those who had referred
21 cases to Project J, including two WF Directors from the town level and eight from
22 community or village levels. None of those 10 WF staff had a professional educational
23 background, nor had they passed the qualification exams. However, this study had not
24 secured approval from the NGO and the Town WF to interview the cases and their
25 families. The NGO and the WF directors showed a deep concern about the
26 confidentiality of their service users. Moreover, they worried that the interviews might
27 bring back unpleasant memories for the children and even re-intensify the conflicts
28 within the families.

29
30 All the collected data was anonymised. The interviews were transcribed and analysed
31 using NVivo 10.0. The analytic strategy of inter-rater reliability were adopted (Shek et
32 al., 2005). Two of the authors independently coded the data and five main themes
33 highlighting the community approach emerged. They were: the rationale for the

community approach, the principles of community development, support by the statutory resources, the protective functions of the community, and the challenges of this approach.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Rationale of the Chinese Community Approach

Social workers of Project J were first to realise the practical barriers of providing child protection services. As social worker A pointed out, ‘The local Departments of Justice or Public Security would only intervene in cases with very serious consequences. This was why we wanted to do something to address this gap in service provision’.

On the other hand, they soon acknowledged the importance of the community in compensating for the incomplete child protection system. As Social Worker B elaborated:

We agreed with community members that mobilising community resources could remedy the problem of insufficient formal support. Moreover, we felt that it would be more feasible for the local community to identify those children at risk and more convenient for them to provide assistance.

5.2 Principles of Community Development

The nascent idea of involving the community became concrete after Project J sought the opinions of community members. At the start of Project J, a total of 61 representatives from different governmental departments, schools, law firms, enterprises, NGOs and the media were invited to focus groups. Two major obstacles for launching a local child protection project were identified in the group discussion. First, these stakeholders, including government officials, were unclear about who should be responsible for reporting cases or receiving referrals. Secondly, although these stakeholders had a greater chance of identifying children from families with difficulties, they possessed limited resources for intervention.

However, the group discussion generated some possible solutions. Regarding the first obstacle of reporting and referral, school teachers proposed that they could help identify

1 and refer potential cases to Project J. Local WF Directors added that they could show
2 social workers to their villages and introduce potential cases to them. Regarding the
3 second obstacle of limited resources, a law firm was very passionate about providing
4 free legal advice, and some local restaurants promised to offer free meals and
5 accommodation to children in need. As social worker B argued, this strategy of
6 collecting bottom-up ideas laid the foundation of Project J.

7
8 At first, we only had a rough idea of relying on the community and we didn't know
9 what exactly could be done. But we believed the community must know better than
10 us and this was the reason why we held focus groups. We were very glad about
11 their proposals about the Alliance, and these proposals became features of Project
12 J later.

13
14 After the focus groups, Project J confirmed two functions for the community network
15 called 'Alliance'. The first function of the Alliance was to identify and refer those
16 children from families with difficulties to Project J. Social workers would provide basic
17 training to those people interested in participating in the Alliance, explaining the
18 definition of 'families with difficulties' and introducing certain preliminary indicators
19 to them for an initial assessment. Alliance members were then encouraged to contact
20 Project J for a formal assessment if they believed they had identified any potential
21 service users.

22
23 The other function of the Alliance was to foster local material and human resources.
24 Alliance members were encouraged to sign up for a programme called 'Promise First'.
25 This programme worked through each member promising to contribute a specific kind
26 of assistance, such as funding, goods or services. When social workers identified a
27 specific need among the cases, they would ask the relevant Alliance member to help by
28 fulfilling their promise. By doing this, Project J raised the expectation of community
29 members that they would be involved in the process of intervention.

30 31 5.3 Support from the Statutory Resources

32 The strong support by the Town WF paved the way for the implementation of the
33 community approach in Project J. As the Town WF Director A stated, 'The work of

1 mobilising resources cannot solely rely on the NGOs, because they are only ordinary
2 organisations in community. As their contractor, we feel obligated to help them.’ Other
3 than the original funding for the two stages, the Town WF actively assisted Project J to
4 secure a further funding of 328,000 yuan (36,396 GBP) from higher levels of authorities
5 (Record J02/J03/J05/J06).

6
7 In addition to the financial support provided, the Town WF also mobilised its sub-
8 ordinate Directors at grass-root levels to work with Project J. Typically, a female
9 member of staff in every Villagers’ Committee or Residents’ Committee acted as the
10 local WF Director. They were expected to carry out the duties assigned to them by the
11 Town WF, such as advocating for the rights of children. Since their work-related duties
12 were highly relevant to child protection, both the Town WF and Project J considered
13 them to be the most important foot-soldiers of the Alliance. All 36 local Directors were
14 persuaded to join the Alliance and social workers developed a close working
15 relationship with them. In addition to attending training sessions, each local WF
16 Director had an individual and monthly meeting with social workers, so that they could
17 be fully aware of the protocol for reporting and referral. As demonstrated later, this
18 effective relationship and partnership with the WF Directors laid the foundation for
19 successful reporting and referrals.

20
21 Furthermore, the Town WF facilitated the use of the community approach by
22 recognising relevant work in the service contract. Social workers were greatly
23 motivated to implement the community approach because relevant parameters were
24 confirmed in the service contract, such as establishing the mechanism for reporting and
25 referrals, collecting community resources, initiating joint conferences with stakeholders,
26 facilitating volunteer groups, and training their volunteers (Record J04).

27 28 5.4 Protective Role of the Community

29 The protective role of the community can be demonstrated in three aspects. First, the
30 Alliance was a very useful way of identifying cases. 140 individuals and organisations
31 signed up for the report and referral duties and they identified 37 of the 51 cases dealt
32 with by Project J. Specifically, 23 cases came from WF Directors, nine from NGOs,
33 two from community residents, two from school teachers and one from a hospital.

1 Since 62% of these 37 cases were identified by WF Directors, they proved to be the
2 most helpful sources of referral. Due to their heavy workload in administration and lack
3 of professional expertise regarding child protection, these Directors used to have little
4 confidence in dealing with child maltreatment cases. As local WF Director F, who
5 referred four cases, commented:

6
7 We always meet children from the families with difficulties in villages. All we can
8 do is visit their homes and talk to their families. However, we have other more
9 important work to do. We can't just devote ourselves to the protection work. We
10 aren't professionals, either. I don't think we can handle these situations by
11 ourselves.

12
13 After working with Project J, the Directors felt Project J was very supportive:

14
15 I referred four cases to Project J, and based on my experiences, the team is very
16 helpful. I think they have more expertise than us. If I meet more children in need
17 of help, I am more than happy to contact social workers (local WF Director F).

18
19 A second feature demonstrating the protective power of the community is the success
20 of Project J in targeting 51 serious cases – a number that far exceeded the caseload of
21 40 as required in the two-year contract. These children were eight years old on average.
22 There were 11 children whose father or mother died while the other worked outside
23 their hometown. There were 22 children who stayed with their father or mother while
24 the other one died or worked outside the hometown. Although 18 of the children were
25 living with their parents, their families were too poor to provide safety or care.
26 Meanwhile, the major issues posed by all these children included: care of severely sick
27 children (14), child poverty (10), child neglect (12), physical abuse (8), emotional
28 disturbance (following the death of parents) (2), self-harming (1), lack of
29 accommodation (1) school problems (1) and others (2).

30
31 Two cases with the most serious harm can be illustrated as follows. Case 1 was a five-
32 year-old girl who was regularly and physically abused by her father. However, it was
33 not until after a serious injury to the child that the police referred the case to the Town

1 WF and ultimately to Project J. During a fierce quarrel with his partner, the enraged
2 father threw Case 1 to the ground. She suffered a life-threatening brain injury and thus
3 lost consciousness. The father was arrested after his partner called the police, but this
4 left the partner alone to deal with issues regarding the costs of the brain surgery and the
5 future livelihood of the family (Record 16001).

6
7 The other case was identified by a local WF Director. Case 2 was a nine-year-old girl
8 looked after by her unemployed mother, while her father had lost contact. Since Case 2
9 did not have a household registration, she never went to school for education. Case 2
10 wandered and begged in street with her mother every day and thus she always looked
11 unclean. When her mother did not return home, it was quite usual for Case 2 to be left
12 alone in street until mid-night. She would occasionally had bruises after she was beaten
13 by the mother (Record 15002).

14
15 The third aspect showing the protective power of the community is that the Alliance
16 successfully mobilised a significant amount of community resources to support children
17 who were referred to Project J. 221 members signed up for the 'Promise First'
18 programme and they were willing to contribute. In practice, not a single Alliance
19 member refused to fulfill the promise when asked to do so; 78 members fulfilled their
20 promises to help 27 cases. After placing an economic value on all the fulfilled promises,
21 it was estimated that Project J generated 615,467.5 yuan (68,293 GBP) of community
22 resources, comprising 387,080 yuan in money, 220,855 yuan in goods (e.g. household
23 items, clothes, stationery or food) and 7,532.5 yuan in voluntary services.

24
25 In particular, the contribution of voluntary work in the programme of 'Promise First'
26 must be noted. 19 volunteers promised to contribute their time and effort to working
27 alongside social workers. After receiving basic training, the routine task for these
28 volunteers was to attend home visits to the cases and report to social workers if they
29 found emergent situations. Moreover, these volunteers would even help to facilitate the
30 care plan as agreed by service users and social workers. For example, an elderly couple
31 helped look after three-year-old Case 3 for four months when her single mother was at
32 work. By doing this, Case 3 would not be tied to the window and left alone at home any
33 more (Record 15008).

5.5 Challenges of Using the Community Approach

Three major challenges can be identified in the case of Project J, which could affect the sustainable use of the community approach in China. First, the ability to protect vulnerable children by the community may be compromised because social workers do not have the legal entitlement to take action. After reviewing all 51 cases, we can show that the community approach was particularly effective for those children who had a severe illness, were living in poverty, were emotionally disturbed or had self-harming behaviour, or lacked accommodation or education. This was clear because their psychological issues could be addressed through the counselling and companionship given by social workers and community members. Also, welfare needs of these children could largely be satisfied if the social workers assisted them in applying for benefits or turned to the Alliance for extra material help.

On the other hand, Project J, as well as the community, could barely manage the situations in which children's safety needed to be secured. This can be illustrated by Case 1 and Case 2 which were both mentioned previously as the cases with the most serious harm. After Case 1 was harmed and sent to hospital, Project J quickly collected the necessary funding for the treatment from the Alliance members. However, the girl's father was soon released from custody after the mother decided to withdraw the prosecution. When the girl was discharged from hospital, she had to return home and still live with her father. Regarding Case 2, the mother did not beat her any more after counselling by social workers. The mother and daughter were also provided with food and money for accommodation by the Alliance members. However, Case 2 could not go to school and still wandered in the street alone, because her mother refused to return to her hometown and apply for the household registration of Case 2.

Apart from lacking legal power, Project J sometimes found it difficult to work within the fragmented institutional arrangements. For example, in order to discuss the issue of education for Case 2, Project J once held a joint conference with the government departments of Civil Affairs, Public Security, Education, Youth League and WF. However, it turned out that not a single authority was able or even willing to settle the issue. As Social Worker B pointed out:

1
2 Facing the neglect or abuse cases, we don't have any mandatory measure to
3 guarantee protection. When turning to government departments for help, they can
4 just ignore our proposals. Meanwhile, it is also very difficult for them to work with
5 each other. We feel powerless about helping those cases.

6
7 Last but not least, the continuous support from the authorities, especially in terms of
8 funding provision, is crucial. Project J was suspended for a whole year between the two
9 stages and it has not been renewed since the end of the second stage in 2017. The major
10 reason for that nonrenewal is that the government body still lacks a specific department
11 responsible for the work of child protection. Town WF is a relevant department for
12 child protection, but not a specifically responsible one. As Town WF's Director A
13 admitted, 'The WF is too weak to influence the town government.' Therefore, every
14 time the one-year contract of Project J finished, Town WF's proposal for subsequent
15 funding was always regarded by the town government to be a 'low priority' (Town WF
16 Director A & B).

17 18 **6. Discussion**

19 This article has reported on the case of Project J using the community approach to
20 support child protection services in China. The elements of this approach are
21 summarised in Figure 1. In order to better understand this approach, contextual factors
22 must first be understood. Despite the serious scale of child maltreatment issues, the
23 major deficiency of the Chinese child protection system rests on its fragmented
24 institutional arrangements, such as the lack of a responsible government department
25 and relevant reporting and processing procedures. Meanwhile, vulnerable families may
26 fail to carry out their responsibility for protection of children. It was these deficiencies
27 of the state and the family support that resulted in the use of the community approach.

28
29 Based on the experiences of Project J, four features of the community approach can be
30 summarised. First, the rationale of this approach is that the community is an integral
31 component in the child protection system. In essence, it can be activated to narrow the
32 service gaps left by the state and the family in the Chinese context. Secondly, the
33 community can be directed to work with those children who had issues of child neglect,

1 physical, emotional or sexual abuses, while their parents have failed to fulfill their
2 guardianship responsibilities

3
4 Thirdly, the principles of community development can be found as the key in the case
5 of Project J. In the first step, community stakeholders should be involved in identifying
6 the obstacles to protecting vulnerable children. Then, bottom-up ideas for solutions
7 should be sought out and valued, such as the proposal of the community support
8 network. After this, the community should be mobilised to participate in reporting,
9 referral and intervention by providing material and voluntary support.

10
11 Fourthly, the role that this community approach plays can be defined as protective. 73%
12 of all the cases in Project J were identified by the Alliance members. These identified
13 cases were assessed as high risk, with children such as suffering from serious sickness,
14 living in poverty, experiencing neglect and abuse. In relation to these problems, Project
15 J succeeded in motivating community members to offer their help in funding, goods
16 and services. The estimated value of the community's contribution was a larger sum
17 than the whole funding for Project J. In particular, community members even assisted
18 the families to accomplish the care plan through voluntary work.

19
20 In order to be successfully implemented, the Chinese community approach requires of
21 the partnership with the statutory context. As the contractor, the Town WF turned out
22 to be a very important partner. It not only provided necessary funding to Project J, but
23 also made specific arrangements of workload in a way favourable for social workers to
24 implement the community work. Moreover, the Town WF facilitated its subordinate
25 Directors in referrals and they contributed the largest number of cases.

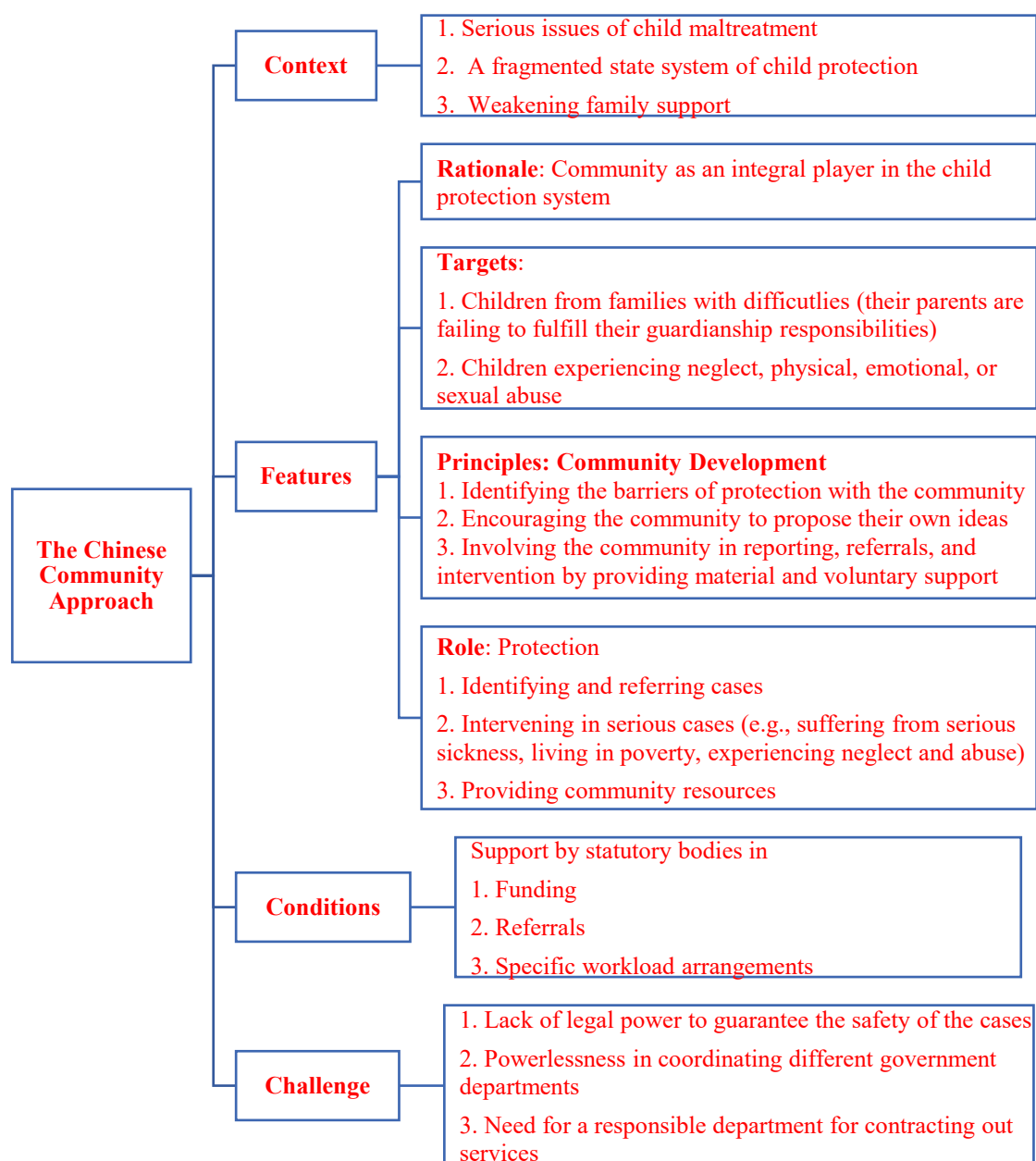
26
27 However, the community approach may be restricted in certain ways. Although the
28 psychological and material needs of vulnerable children can mostly be satisfied by
29 community resources, this approach can barely address the cases with significant harm
30 or threats to the children's safety. This is because NGOs and other community
31 stakeholders are not given the legal power to enforce any compulsory measures. Much
32 worse, these serious cases tend to receive little support from government departments,
33 mainly because the community is too powerless to influence them. Moreover, the

1 promotion of contracted-out child protective services still remains unclear. The future
 2 success of that approach may depend on the institutionalisation of a responsible
 3 department for child protection, and that task may lie with the recent establishment of
 4 the Department of Child Welfare by the MCA in 2019. In short, it can be argued that
 5 the community approach can neither replace institutional support, nor can its potential
 6 be fully developed without institutional support.

7

8

Figure 1: A Summary of the Chinese Community Approach



9

1 This study makes four major contributions to the current literature. First, it supports the
2 importance of community in providing China's welfare services (Wood & Gough,
3 2006), and it does so especially by acknowledging the contribution of informal groups
4 or NGOs in Chinese child protection services (Jiang et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2017b;
5 Zhao et al., 2017c; Shang et al., 2010; Shang & Wu, 2003a; Shang & Wu, 2003b).
6 Moreover, the community approach proposed by this study furthers the on-going
7 project of barefoot social workers in rural China (China Philanthropy Research Institute
8 and UNICEF, 2019). Instead of relying on a semi-official child welfare worker for
9 delivering a broad scope of personal services, this community approach not only
10 depends on professional social workers from NGOs with a contractual relationship with
11 governments, it also focuses specifically on the work of reporting, referring, and
12 intervening by means of establishing community networks.

13
14 Secondly, this study indicates the potential for the community approach to be supported
15 by the state in terms of both financial and human resources, instead of being advocated
16 simply because of the retreat of state welfare (Fazzi, 2019; Shang & Wu, 2003a). As
17 Project J demonstrated, a partnership among an NGO, the community, and the
18 governments can produce even better outcomes for the protection of children, such as
19 by funding support or case referrals.

20
21 Thirdly, this study confirms Fazzi's (2019) suggestion that the community approach
22 could be facilitated better if social workers were given greater professional autonomy
23 and a less rigid workload. For example, the service contract of Project J was negotiated
24 between the NGO and Town WF, so that relevant community work could be recognised
25 as legitimate. This type of negotiation could also be used to demonstrate the possibility
26 of Chinese NGOs developing a relatively equal (instead of subordinate) (Author's own)
27 relationship with governments.

28
29 Fourthly, this study clearly shows that the protective role of the community could work
30 effectively in an underdeveloped system of child protection, rather than community
31 intervention being perceived either narrowly, as being preventive within a developed
32 system (Tunstall & Malin, 2011, Davies, 2004), or as functioning only in extremely
33 insecure societies (O'Leary et al., 2015; Wessells, 2015; Jones et al., 2014). This further

suggests that socially oriented and user-centred approaches, such as the community approach described in this study, can support the child protection services in the current Chinese context better than the individual-oriented and expert-dominated approaches such as the ones first developed in Western contexts (Jack, 2004; Wright, 2004; Jones et al., 2014).

Finally, the limitations of this study need to be noted. First, the research findings were based on second-hand data and interviews with social workers and WF Directors. A more complete picture would have been revealed if children and their families had been included in this study. However, before a study can include children and their families, ethical issues, such as confidentiality and prevention of harm, must be well settled. Second, while a qualitative approach was adopted for describing and appraising the community approach, future research should consider employing quantitative techniques to identify more details about the specific types of cases for which this community approach could be useful. Third, since the research findings of the Chinese community approach are based on a case study, it still needs more reports for replication in other Chinese communities.

7. Conclusion

This case study has described a pilot using the community approach to support child protection services in China. This approach was based on a belief in the significance of the community in the child protection system and highlighted the protective role that the community can play. By targeting vulnerable children with little family care, this approach could achieve relatively satisfactory outcomes within an under-developed child protection system by working with the community and the statutory context. However, attention should be paid to its limitations in dealing with serious cases of abuse or neglect, as well as in developing a sustainable partnership with authorities.

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